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WASHINGTON | James Reston

The Plumber's Game

WASHINGTON

The top Reagan officials are miffed these days when they read leaks in the press about what they're doing in private, and you can't blame them.

For if it ever got out what they were doing, or not doing, in private, they would really be in trouble.

"It's disgusting the way stuff leaks out," Secretary of State Shultz said the other day. "And we've got to find the people who are doing it, and fire them."

George has been around here long enough to know that this is a silly idea, and if he doesn't, Bernie Kalb, his spokesman, can explain that there's no way the official plumbers can stop the leaks.

The executive branch is the only known vessel that leaks from the top. It leaks the baloney it thinks people will swallow, and threatens to sue anybody who publishes information it wants to suppress.

But this plumber's game of stopping the leaks can't last very long. Too many people have to be in on the President's decisions at home and abroad, if they're to be effective.

He has to consult with Congress and talk things over with the allies before he acts, and in the process, everybody talks.

Democracy at home and alliance politics abroad is a gabby business. There's no way to shut people up.

The allies will speak in their parliaments, and bureaucrats here will speak out if they think the people are being deceived.

This is the point President Reagan may have missed. He thinks that what is popular is right, but the Republican leaders in the Senate and House disagree about his budget deficits and are insisting that he compromise or risk losing control of the Senate this year and maybe the White House in 1988.

The Administration has a valid point about press disclosure of covert or secret operations. It is put in an awkward position when reporters publicize its efforts to block the Communist intrigues in Latin America, southern Africa or the Middle East.

This is what bothers William Casey at the C.I.A., who wants to take the newspapers to court for interfering with his covert operations, and even putting his spies and the sources of his information at risk.

Here the press has to be careful, and discuss with the Government what is fair or dangerous reporting. So far, this conflict has not been resolved between responsible officials of the Government and the media.

The Reagan Administration is trying to deal with this problem by

dismissing officials who leak information to the press.

It is even demanding that hundreds of thousands of Federal employees take lie-detector tests to prove their loyalty to the Reagan Administration.

More than that, it has suggested that grants of Federal money for scientific research be denied to scholars unless they approve of the Administration's "Star Wars" program.

The Freedom of Information Act is now under attack, on the ground that it is interfering with the Administration's defense of the Republic.

Strange things are happening here in the name of security. For example, Michael E. Pillsbury, Assistant Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning, was dismissed on the suspicion that he had leaked infor-

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mation about sending U.S. Stinger missiles to anti-Communist rebels in Angola, and that he had flunked a lie-detector test during the investigation.

The Administration is not kidding about these "leaks." It wants to put lie-detector tests on everybody privy to sensitive security information.

It is really concerned that there are more leaks out of this Administration than any other in recent memory and it doesn't understand why.

One reason may be that the Administration has not persuaded its civil servants that it's telling the truth. They know the difference between propaganda and truth. In short, they are the inside "lie detectors" and, in defiance of this Administration's public relations techniques, are the source of most of the leaks.

The President cannot really deal with this problem by playing the plumber's game to stop the leaks. He cannot preside over a policy without consulting with Congress and the allies. They have to know what's going on, and they will talk, not only among themselves but to the network of communications all over the world.

Also, even his own people here won't play this game. Propaganda is a self-limiting disease. If the President doesn't persuade his own people that he's on the right track, they will oppose him and leak their opposition to the press. □